

Women in Architecture: From Sources of Inspiration to Protagonists on the Architectural Scene

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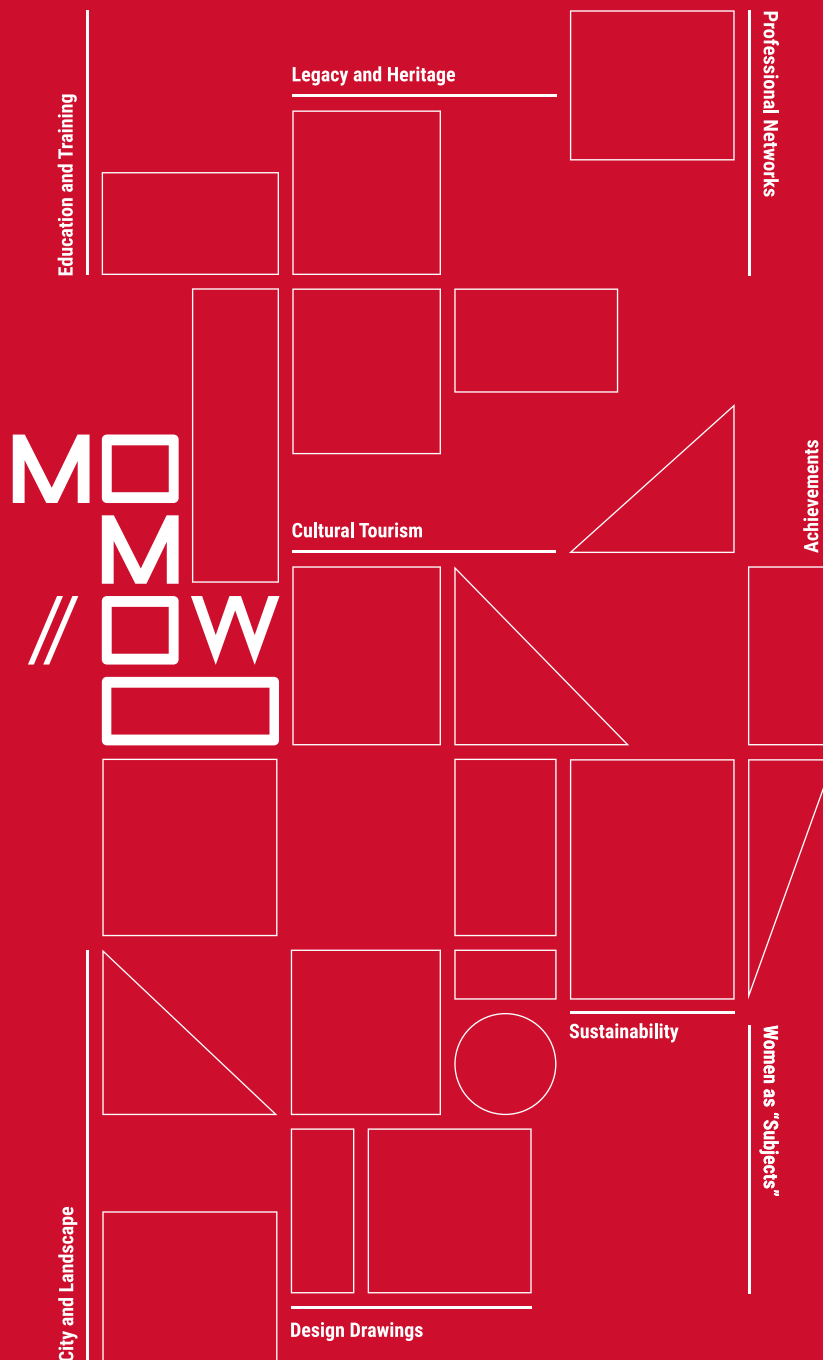
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# Women's Creativity since the Modern Movement (1918–2018)

Toward a New Perception and Reception



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WOMEN'S CREATIVITY SINCE  
THE MODERN MOVEMENT



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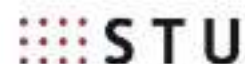
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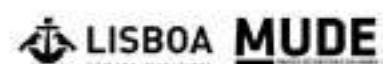


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Women's Creativity since the Modern Movement (1918-2018)  
Toward a New Perception and Reception

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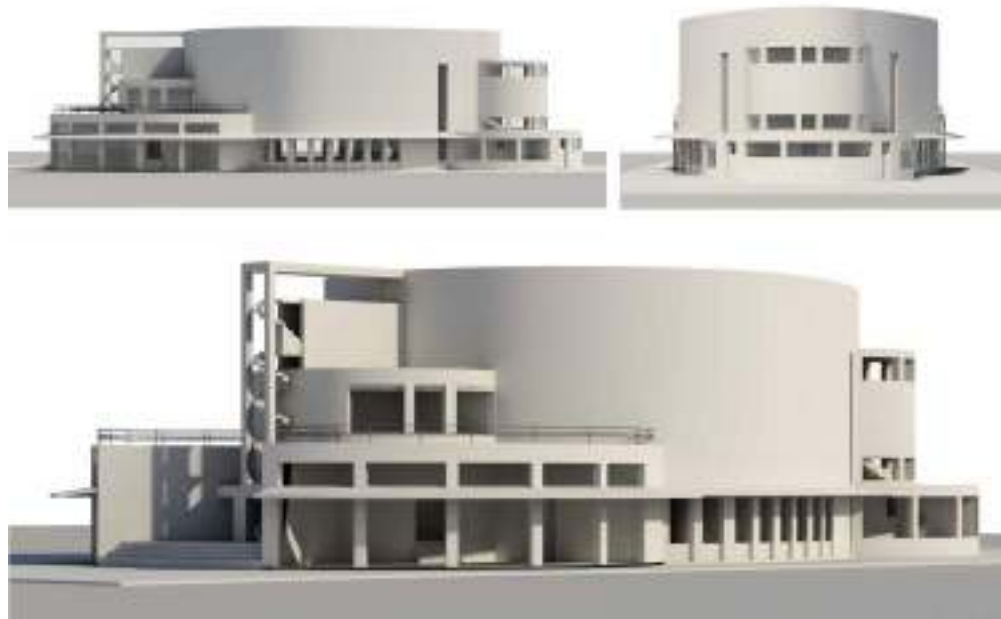


Fig. 9. Facades and perspective view (by S. Vattano).

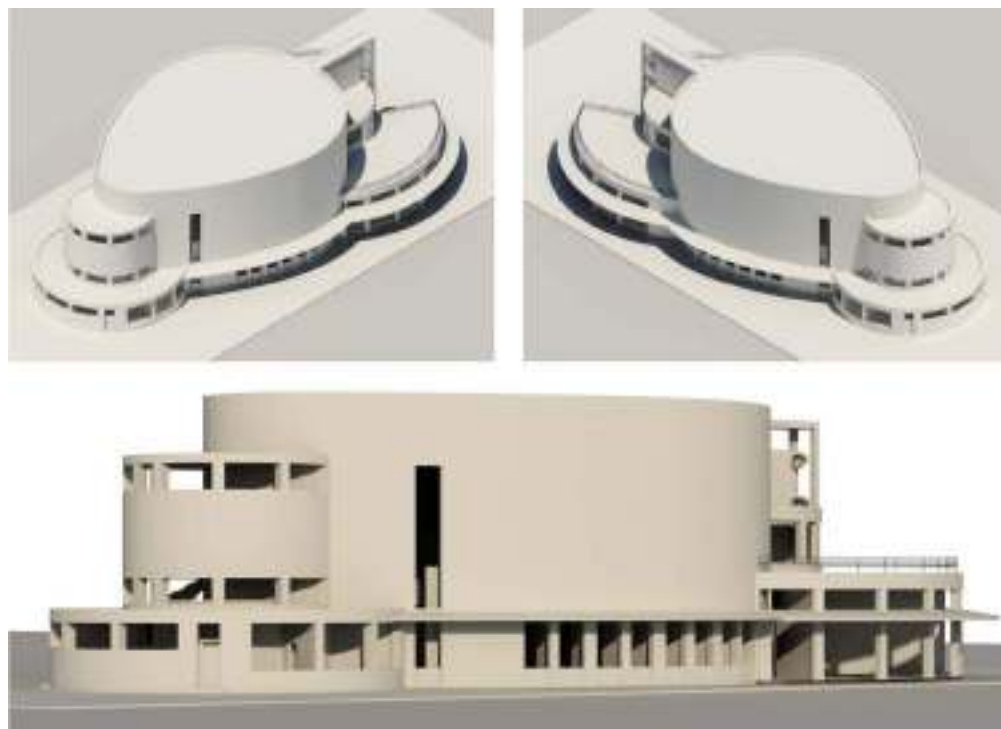


Fig. 10. Isometric views and perspective view (by S. Vattano).

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## Women in Architecture: From Sources of Inspiration to Protagonists on the Architectural Scene

From the ancient to the modern world, that of women is the theme most addressed, most considered, most presented and discussed among all the artistic (and not only) manifestations of man. The female figure has always been a source of privileged inspiration in the architectural and artistic field. Since prehistoric times we find it represented with many facets and invested with multiple roles, from that of mother to that of divinity, etc. The woman evokes life and pushes the artist to look at yourself inside and try to understand his connection with nature, with the earth and with his being a man. The idealized female form aims to represent absolute perfection, above all other living forms, because it is a symbol of beauty, elegance and harmony. Even the terms that we use in everyday language are influenced by the charm that evokes the feminine being for example the words 'art', 'architecture', 'painting', 'sculpture' in Italian language are all feminine, almost to indicate that the genre of a word may suggest something beautiful, for the eyes and for the heart. We think for example the words 'pillar' and 'column': they are two synonyms, because both refer to vertical elements with support function, but only the term column contains in itself a decorative meaning and makes us imagine something beautiful, elegant and with an architectural value. As Vittorio Sgarbi wrote:

It is not only carnality or sensuality, or attraction of beauty; the female figure is the symbol of dreams and desires, it is an evanescent image, which you can never reach to the end: it is the dream, it is the hope, it is the desire.<sup>1</sup>

The Nike of Samothrace, Hellenistic masterpiece that challenges the centuries, is perhaps the most

<sup>1</sup> Vittorio Sgarbi, *Piene di grazia: I volti della donna nell'arte* (Milano: Bompiani, 2011).

fitting example in reference to the concept of 'dream': the personification of victory in an indomitable woman transmits much more than the simple admiration of a beautiful and perfect body; it is the dream of victory, the proud desire that every human being has in his heart and which the artist has been able to transfer in the matter. Tackling the 'feminine' theme means to measure oneself with an inner world that is not simply the result of experience, but also derives from the human condition, from its origins and from the link with nature. 'The journey to the inexhaustible and fascinating search for a message of beauty and life leads the woman to become a symbol and representation of each time, of all times, timeless'.<sup>2</sup>

In every age, precise relationships can be found between the shape of the human body, especially that female, and the architectural styles. Vitruvius, for example, in the fourth Book of the *De Architectura* treatise, dedicated to the myth on the origin of orders, provides a particular interpretation of the aspect of the Greek column, comparing that relating to the Ionic order to the female figure:

Similmente avendo poi voluto inalzare un tempio a Diana, presero sulle stesse tracce le delicate proporzioni della donna, per formarne un aspetto diverso di un ordine nuovo: e fecero in primo luogo la grossezza della colonna un ottavo dell'altezza, per darle un'aria più svelta: e vi aggiunsero sotto anche la base ad imitazione della scarpa, nel capitello le volute quasi ricci increspati di capelli pendenti a destra ed a sinistra, e con cimase e serti distribuiti in luogo di capelli ne ornarono gli aspetti; per tutto il fuso v'incavarono i canali a similitudine delle pieghe delle vesti delle matrone. Così trovarono due diverse specie di colonne, una imitando l'aspetto virile senza ornato, l'altra colla delicatezza d'ornato e proporzione femminile.<sup>3</sup>

Even Leon Battista Alberti, in the sixth book of the *De Re Aedificatoria* treatise, argues that the beauty of an architectural work, which can be defined by the right proportion between the parts and the achievement of the balance obtained when no element that determines it can be removed, changed or added, is a factor to be sought in comparison with human body beauty, especially the female one. In other cases, the evocation of the female figure has become part of the architecture, not in a strictly symbolic sense, but with the actual presence of its aspect. Among the many examples one of the best known is that of the Caryatids Loggia, which belongs to the Greek temple of the *Erechtheum*, where, instead of the load-bearing columns, there are imposing female statues.

The binomial 'woman – beauty', which has always accompanied the idea of femininity, is clear and indisputable. The concept of beauty appears forcefully in the history of thought already with Plato, becoming one of the focal elements of his reflection. For the Greek philosopher, beauty is a timeless

quality, of perfection, a constitutive part of ideas, at the origin of all things.<sup>4</sup> Perfection, harmony and symmetry of the parts are transposed into the human figure which becomes an important source of inspiration, the starting point for each representation.

From this moment on, the concept of canonical beauty is associated with the female figure and the goddess Venus (Aphrodite for the Greek world) will embody the ideals of elegance, grace, sensuality and beauty par excellence, becoming the most represented female mythological figure in western art. The concept of beauty will undergo changes over the centuries, coming to a more subjective connotation: it is the individual subject to decide what is beautiful and what is not. But, beyond any debate on this topic, women will continue to remain in time an undisputed subject in the representation of beauty and in the personification of beauty itself.

If on one side this can be understood as a stereotype that has always limited the female figure, underestimating her inner abilities and qualities, on the other hand, for some women, beauty has represented an important quality to exploit. A fascinating association is established between talent and aspect, between the beauty of the artwork and that of the artist herself. Vasari praises, for example, the sculptor skills of Properzia de' Rossi (Italian artist, the only sculptor woman during the Renaissance period who also made drawings and engravings) and adds 'her body was beautiful'.<sup>5</sup>

Also for the painter Elisabetta Sirani,<sup>6</sup> celebrated by Italian and European sovereign and diplomats, who were anxiously trying to own one of her works, her legendary 'masculine' beauty and charm have certainly contributed to making her famous.

But before aesthetics becomes territory of sexual claims, art history goes through centuries and centuries in which women are simply objects of representation. The beauty of the female figure, in the different iconographies of the art history, becomes the symbol of all time. Today it is possible to observe myriads of artistic representations of every age, which depict images of female figures. These representations, from the most conservative to the most innovative of the twentieth century,<sup>7</sup> which apparently show the woman seen as an object and emerge from a masculine observation

4 Plato, *Symposium*, 210e–211a

5 'Costei era di corpo bellissima' in Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de' più eccellenti architetti, pittori, et scultori italiani, da Cimabue, insino a' tempi nostri* (Torino: Einaudi 1986).

6 Elisabetta Sirani (1638–1665) was the most celebrated and quoted woman artist in Bologna and her works were exhibited in major European collections during her short life. She became famous for her 'ultramodern' high baroque style and admired for her technical and artistic virtuosity. From: Adelina Modesti, "Elisabetta Sirani," *enciclopedia delle donne*, <http://www.enciclopediadelledonne.it/biografie/elisabetta-sirani/> (accessed January, 2018).

7 In the last century a new type of female illustrations spread, considered by some immoral and unseemly, mainly used in advertising. The illustrated girls, beautiful and sensual, represent a typical and functional female model at the same time, a real stereotype: shapely body, skimpy dresses, bare legs, reassuring attitude, built to show their beauty, generally in domestic settings. From: Massimo Ruffilli, *Girls Design: Visualità della figura femminile* (Firenze: Alinea, 2003), 72.

2 "Tiziana Todi, "Donna, fonte di ispirazione inesauribile nell'arte," Female World (posted February 5, 2014), <http://www.femaleworld.it/donna-fonte-di-ispirazione-inesauribile-nellarte/> (accessed on January 2018).

3 Vitruvius, *De Architectura*, Book 4, Chapter 1.





Fig. 1. Some of the most famous artistic creations of all time, which enhance the beauty of the woman making it eternal

limited to the surface and the pure aesthetic appearance, instead outline, at the same time, a subject that comes out with a great revolutionary force, a subject who has made a great journey in the affirmation of himself over the centuries. Among the most famous examples of artistic creations that wanted to enhance the beauty of the female figure, making it somehow eternal, we can remember: *Lady with an ermine* (1488–90) (Fig. 1a) and *La Gioconda* (1503–6) (Fig. 1b) by Leonardo Da Vinci, *La Fornarina* (1518–19) (Fig. 1c) by Raffaello Sanzio, *Girl with a pearl earring* (1665–6) (Fig. 1d) by Jan Vermeer, *La Chevelure* (1876) (Fig. 1e) by Pierre-Auguste Renoir, *Judith and the Head of Holofernes* (1901) (Fig. 1f) by Gustav Klimt, *Portrait of Jeanne Hébuterne* (1919) (Fig. 1g) by Amedeo Modigliani, *Portrait of Dora Maar* (1937) (Fig. 1h) by Pablo Picasso, *Marilyn* (1962) (Fig. 1i) by Andy Warhol, *Girl with hair ribbon* (1965) (Fig. 1j) by Roy Lichtenstein.

Even today, woman is a source of inspiration in various fields, not merely as a materialization of her overall image, but also through her characteristic forms, which continue to be cited in the most varied architectural compositions. The examples in support of these statements are numerous:

many stylistic solutions of Liberty are a pretext to mention the female figure in its grace, elegance and sensuality. In this language conceived between the nineteenth and twentieth century, the female figure appears completely transformed with respect to the past; her forms emerge from bronzes and ceramics, decorated glass and architectural elements, as if to declare a new role for woman, as protagonist and dominatrix.<sup>8</sup> The approach to this transformation of the woman does not go in one direction: while the bourgeois male sees precisely in the epiphany of fatal and sensual women the apotheosis of the woman object, the woman, in reality, carries on a battle for the emancipation, for the establishment of social relations that assure her a certain freedom, and she does it through a return and a direct contact with the original nature.<sup>9</sup>

### The New Role of Woman in the Professional Field

In the artistic and technical-scientific field, the active role of woman has been for many centuries put in the background, and in many cases also hampered, both for production and for tasks related to the client, to the collecting, study and protection of the historical and artistic heritage. This is an area in which the woman has never been able to express herself completely because of the numerous discriminations that forced her to put aside creativity, to devote herself to works 'more congenial to her' or that prevented her from dedicating herself to subjects considered 'little decent'. A marginalization that can be found until the nineteenth century but which, however, does not disappear definitively in the following centuries.

In the last twenty years, the increase in female participation to the university system and the tendential decrease in the phenomenon of educational segregation have contributed to make the professional skills of women very similar to the male ones; but there are fields in which men and women are still not distributed homogeneously among the different disciplinary areas. The female presence is relevant above all among the humanistic disciplines, while it appears limited in the scientific and technological sectors.<sup>10</sup>

If we think, for example, the profession of architect, for a long time it has been considered typically masculine, both for tradition and for alleged difficulties related to the control of the design phase and then of the construction site. Even today, citing more than ten names of Italian and/or foreign

8 Fernando Mazzocca (ed.), *Liberty: Uno stile per l'Italia moderna* (Milano: Silvana Editoriale, 2014).

9 Marco Cima, *Liberty: La donna al centro dell'universo* (Torino: Nautilus, 2010).

10 Francesca Zajczyk, *Donne e tecnologie, tra modernità e stereotipi* (Milano: Department of Sociology and Social Research, 2005).

architect women who have achieved a certain professional importance is not a very easy task.

Benito Mussolini, convinced supporter of the distance of the woman from architecture, in 1927 asserted that 'The woman must obey .... She's analytical, not synthetic. ... She's foreign to architecture, which is a synthesis of all arts, and this is a symbol of her destiny'.<sup>11</sup>

Actually, it is precisely starting since the thirties that the themes related to architecture, under a technical-artistic profile, and aspects relating to the profession of architect, begin to collect particular interest from women.<sup>12</sup>

The difficulties in undertaking this profession are still many, linked not certainly to a question of intellectual inferiority, but rather to factors of scepticism of eventual clients, or to the complexity of the project process. But from this moment on, the female presence in the sector becomes more and more consistent, until arriving, in the 1990s, to the so-called 'pink overtaking': it occurs an overrun of women enrolled in the faculties of Architecture (and more in general at the Italian university) than men.<sup>13</sup> However, this increase does not seem to correspond to a greater presence of the women in the profession.

Architecture continues to remain a "foreign land" for women. They're yet above all the men - of the past and of the present - who define the quality criteria, select the projects, write the history, theory and criticism of architecture. Women must fight against an image of marginality and dilettantism, they must face difficulties in managing private/professional life. They still have difficulty in finding an own identity and to work out alternatives without that this relegating them to an irrelevant ghetto and for a few passionate people.<sup>14</sup>

In particular, women lose position with regard to prestigious positions; only exceptionally, in fact, they hold managerial positions, while the vast majority work independently, obtaining a space in 'niche' sectors with respect to architectural design, such as furniture, fittings and garden design. In the age of equal opportunities, the most common form of access to the profession for a woman remains the partnership with a man and this is demonstrated by the reviews of projects published in recent years. So it is natural to ask oneself how to consider those women who have made it, that have succeeded in establish themselves independently, reaching an important and successful position: 'These names are flashes in the sky, comets stars, extraordinary presences, or just a fragment of a

world full of figures, stories and experiences, left deliberately, and long, in the shadows?'<sup>15</sup>.

From this reflection comes the need to trace the profiles of those women who have been able to give an identity to their thinking, their studies and their research, with a view to transmit to future generations a cultural heritage that the traditional system of education scholastic and university –despite the ever-increasing presence of women– has forgotten or perhaps never considered.

### Architectural Drawing Made by Women

When women begin to establish themselves in the field of architecture, freehand drawing is an indispensable means of communication to put planning ideas on paper, to make people understand their intentions and to express their personality.

Through the analysis of some of these graphic representations, made by important personalities of the recent past such as Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky and Lina Bo Bardi, who have made the drawing a faithful tool for architectural design, and by more current figures such as Gae Aulenti and Zaha Hadid, who have come to the elaboration of images far from any traditional architectural representation, it is possible to draw a line of thought within a broader and general concept of the history of female architecture.<sup>16</sup>

Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky was born in Vienna in 1897 and is the first Austrian woman to graduate in architecture. Designer and political militant, she is the creator of the *Frankfurt kitchen* in 1926, prototype of the modular kitchen that we still use today; she dedicated herself to the construction of houses for single women with children and to the construction of school and educational buildings. Among the main objectives of her work there is in fact that of creating better living conditions for women, trying to rationalize and optimize spaces, reducing their stay time in favor of those to devote to themselves.<sup>17</sup> These studies motivate the presence of multiple interior designs, which investigate in a meticulous way the living and working spaces of women, to better understand the problems related to them and thus arrive at the identification of alternative solutions. The kitchen thus becomes the fulcrum of the whole house. The architect makes a design study that proceeds

11 Caterina Franchini, "Women Pioneers in Civil Engineering and Architecture in Italy: Emma Strada and Ada Bursi," *MOMOWO: Women Designers, Craftswomen, Architects and Engineers Between 1918 and 1945*, edited by Marjan H. Groot et al. (Ljubljana: ZRC Publishing House, 2015), 82–101.

12 The article "Modern architecture and women architects" appears in the issue of the Italian women's Almanac of 1935, bearing the signature of the journalist Anna Maria Speckel, which brings to light an unsuspected microcosm of women dedicated to architecture.

13 Florence Marchal, "L'architettura sessuata, equivalenza e simmetria," *Casabella* 732 (2005), 65.

14 Tommasina Gengaro and Rosaia Ruberto, "Architettura al femminile' - tra mimetismo e specificità," *Tempi e spazi: Architettura al femminile* (October 2005), <http://www.tempiespazi.it/spazi/archite/> (accessed January, 2018).

15 Gisella Bassanini, "Le madri dell'architettura moderna: Alcuni ritratti nel panorama italiano e straniero," *Parametro* 257 (2005), 20.

16 Alice Vercellino, "Il disegno dell'architettura al femminile" (Graduation thesis, Politecnico di Torino, 2007).

17 Benedetta Dubini, "Donne e professioni: Le pioniere dell'architettura," *mondo rosa shokking* (posted April 16, 2010), <http://www.mondorosashokking.com/archivio/DonneeprofessioniLepionieredellarchitettura/tabid/689/Default.aspx.html> (accessed January, 2018).





Fig. 2. Four examples of female architecture drawings: **2a)** Margarete Shutte-Lihotzky, *Standardized kitchen right with seating*, Frankfurt 1926. From: *Dalla cucina alla città: Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky*, edited by Lorenza Minoli (Milano: Angeli, 1999), 65; **2b)** Lina Bo Bardi, *Itamambuca residential complex*, Ubatuba, São Paulo 1965. From: Istituto Lina Bo e P.M. Bardi, *Lina Bo Bardi* (exhibition, São Paulo, 1993, Charta, Milano, 1994), 85; **2c)** Gae Aulenti, *Project for the new exit of the Uffizi on piazza Castellani*, Firenze 1998. From: Margherita Petranzan, *Gae Aulenti* (Milano: Rizzoli-Skira, 1996), 124; **2d)** Zaha Hadid, *Prado Museum Extension*, Madrid 1996. From: Luigi Prestinenza Puglisi, *Zaha Hadid: Progetti e opere* (Roma: EdilStampa, 2000), 114.

inductively from the inside out, from the particular to the general.<sup>18</sup> The rationalization of the interior space becomes the generating element of the dwelling itself. The stroke of the drawing remains well defined and precise, so much so that it looks like a drawing made to CAD. Nothing is traced with randomness and without precision, but everything is built according to a rigid geometric pattern (Fig. 2a).

Lina Bo Bardi was born in Rome in 1914 and graduated in the same city in 1939; later he moved to Milan where he began to carry out an intense professional activity that saw her as one of the founders of the Movement of Studies for Architecture. She is a designer with a combative and restless spirit,

18 Lorenza Minoli (ed.), *Dalla cucina alla città: Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky* (Milano: Franco Angeli, 1999).

constantly animated by experimentation in which political commitment and professional activity are inseparable.<sup>19</sup> Observing her design sketches you are immediately struck by the spontaneity of the lines and the sensation of freshness that they communicate. Differently Lihotzky, her drawings clearly express the intention to quickly fix the ideas that emerge in the mind on paper, to avoid losing the inspiration of the moment. To achieve this goal, the architect uses rapid and fast lines, without worrying about making a perfect design. Her graphic representations refer to an almost childlike world, made up of simple but strongly communicative gestures. Moreover, in her drawings the architectural object is never isolated, but constantly related to its context, animated and enriched by figures and objects. Even the use of colour in some drawings represents an added value, letting the volumes emerge, outlining the shapes and giving depth to the image (Fig. 2b).

Gae Aulenti was born in Palazzolo della Stella (Udine) in 1927. She studied at the Polytechnic of Milan where she graduated in 1953. The ten-year collaboration with the historical Casabella-Continuità magazine is fundamental for its formation.<sup>20</sup> Her most mature production is linked to the international 'Neoliberty' movement.<sup>21</sup> Her drawings are the clear manifestation of her way of understanding architecture, linked to a typically scientific approach. In his drawings the intent is to reproduce architectural views, foreshortenings or general views close to reality, a sort of 'immersive visual storytelling'<sup>22</sup>. The main aspiration of Gae Aulenti is to create an effect of continuity of the culture of every place in which her architecture must fit and at the same time give life to forms and figures with a personal and contemporary content (Fig. 2-c).

Zaha Hadid was born in Baghdad (Iraq) in 1950 and graduated in 1977 from the Architectural Association in London. Her drawings fulfil the main function of representing everything that the architect's imagination is able to create. In her representations a 'new' world appears, characterized by unusual organizations, where hierarchies are abolished and acquired, and traditional mental orders are broken. 'This is a challenge job, an exciting adventure through the expressive possibilities of the space'.<sup>23</sup> The spaces created in her drawings born from incentive and indications coming from all those characters and movements that are congenial to her inventiveness, from Constructivism, to Neoplasticism. The forms of her architecture become ever lighter, transparent and stratified. If the projects of the early years are collages with fragmented pieces, over time the forms evolve into indi-

19 Gizela Bassanini, "Lina Bo Bardi," *enciclopedia delle donne*, <http://www.enciclopediadelledonne.it/biografie/lina-bo-bardi/> (accessed January, 2018).

20 "Gae Aulenti," *Floornature*, <http://www.floornature.it/gae-aulenti-37/> (accessed January, 2018).

21 Movement based on the critical revaluation of Art Nouveau, favoring the transition from Eclecticism to Rationalism. Anna Marotta, "Gae Aulenti progetta il nuovo in Palatium Vetus: Obiettivi, significati, scelte formali," *Palatium Vetus: Il broletto ritrovato nel cuore di Alessandria*, edited by Anna Marotta (Roma: Gangemi, 2016), 146.

22 Marotta "Gae Aulenti," 146.

23 Luigi Prestinenza Puglisi, *Zaha Hadid: Progetti e opere* (Roma: EdilStampa, 2000).



vidual gestures. The drawing represents for Zaha Hadid the medium through which the idea, when the imagination is at the peak of its expression, breaks into reality to meet the material.<sup>24</sup> (Fig. 2d)

These four 'worlds', briefly described and analyzed from the point of view of graphic and stylistic production, can provide an important starting point for reflection on the wide and complex theme of female architecture. The different approach that women have, compared to men, to the project and to the profession, has emerged with greater strength; their sensitivity to issues related to the environment, quality of life and safety, allows the development of architectural and urban solutions with a precise look at the times and ways of experiencing space.

The production of these four women architects marked a before and after compared to their passage on the international architectural scene; it would be desirable for many other women like them could succeed in this undertaking.

As Zaha Hadid herself stated in one of her last interviews:

Even though recently women are affirming more and more in the field of architecture, this doesn't mean it's easy, there are still immense challenges to be faced. The change has been enormous in recent years, but it need to continue in this direction.<sup>25</sup>

It is beautiful, however, to think, but above all to note, that women have finally passed 'on the other side of the sheet' and can, with their trait, leave an indelible mark of their 'poetics', of their work and of their choices in aesthetic, technological, functional setting and not only.

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## A Visible, Digital and Useful Future for Drawings and Designs

The passion and special strength that allowed many of the open-minded women that dare to swim in the fields of Design in the Modern Movement period, was once materialized over a paper, leaving sketches, design procedures, technical plans, etc. Sometimes, due to the new kind of objects to draw (tapestry for instance) or the self-taught way of doing technical plans, we can find very interesting and personal graphic codes.

Architects, Engineers, and other persons that have the creativity and technical knowledge that is necessary to bring a new object from the ideal to the real world will be referred to as 'Designers' (with capital 'D') in this article.

The voice of creativity for a Designer finds its main expression through drawings. In the same way as Poetry needs to articulate words through syntax and grammar, Mathematics uses numbers and formulas, or Music has its own symbols and harmony rules, Design needs to use drawings (as sketches) during the process of solving a problem, and also once the solution is found, drawings are needed for communicating an idea that has to be accepted and manufactured.

Depending on what kind of object we are dealing with, its complexity and other factors as: who is going to manufacture it and where, if there are or not some regulations to be observed..., the type of documentation generated could be very different. As an example we can think of these two case: on the one hand we have a Designer that draws a single sketch with which the object can perfectly be constructed by himself or a well-known manufacturer, and on the other hand, a sophisticated high-technology object, with different parts that are designed and manufactured all

<sup>24</sup> Cesare De Sessa, *Zaha Hadid: Eleganze dissonanti* (Torino: Testo&immagine, 2006).

<sup>25</sup> Simona Ferrioli, "Zaha Hadid: Nel 2016 sarà la prima donna a ricevere la RIBA Royal Gold Medal," Architeti.com (posted September 29, 2018), <https://www.architeti.com/zaha-hadid-nel-2016-sara-la-prima-donna-a-ricevere-la-riba-royal-gold-medal.html> (accessed January, 2018).